

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1997, the General Assembly amended the *Code of Virginia* to require school safety audits and define them as a “written assessment of the safety conditions in each public school to (i) identify and, if necessary, develop solutions for physical safety concerns, including building security issues and (ii) identify and evaluate any patterns of student safety concerns occurring on school property or at school-sponsored events.” The *Code* also gave oversight of the school safety audit process to the Virginia Department of Education (DOE).

In response, DOE developed a school safety audit protocol to help guide the content and procedures of the audit process. In 2000, the Virginia Center for School Safety (VCSS) was established within the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). Among the VCSS’ duties was a charge to collect, analyze, and disseminate Virginia school safety data, including school safety audit information. In 2001, that duty was expanded when division superintendents were required to submit all audits to the VCSS. In 2003, the requirement to submit audits to the VCSS every three years was again revised to a yearly requirement.

To address its reporting mandate, the VCSS requested assistance from the DCJS Criminal Justice Research Center and began efforts to work collaboratively with DOE on school safety audit reporting requirements. In May 2002, the VCSS and DOE formed a Safety Audit Work Group to discuss emergent issues regarding their respective legislative authorities. The challenges reconciling these separate, but interdependent, responsibilities were acknowledged. Both agencies agreed that:

- it would be best to avoid imposition of two independent school safety audits,
- the current reporting system needs improvements to make it constructive and useful for schools, and
- the information provided by the schools should be specific enough that data can be analyzed statewide.

A later recommendation by the Secure Virginia Panel supported improving school safety by designating one state agency (either DOE or DCJS) as responsible for the process development, measurement, and follow-up of school safety audits.

In the summer of 2003, VCSS initiated a plan to compile and organize school safety audit data in a systematic fashion in order to review the status of school safety audit data in Virginia. With the help of the DCJS Research Center, a review of the Virginia school safety audit process was conducted. All Virginia public schools were asked to send their school safety audit materials to DCJS where documents were analyzed to assess the nature and scope of data collection variability for school safety audit information across the state. A total of 1,624 public schools representing 112 school divisions responded with some sort of submission to DCJS’ request for school safety audit material. This represents about 80% of all Virginia public schools.

The review found that the considerable flexibility allowed in the reporting process resulted in significant data variability across localities. Further, response variability to individual checklist items was found to be a considerable barrier to analysis. In the review it was found that two-thirds of the schools submitted multiple responses to single response checklist items, greatly

complicating any statewide interpretation of these data. Additionally, an examination of the existing school safety audit protocol found that the checklist's design, although developed to simplify the process for local schools, lacked some details necessary to produce suitable data. Specifically, the problems included the use of double-barreled questions, unclear definitions of critical concepts, and vague instructions. These findings served to underline the fact that the school safety audit document was not designed to yield summary data.

This review of the school safety audit process and associated material showed that, due to the extensive variability in the content and format of submissions, the statewide status of school safety in Virginia is unclear. To address these issues, the research team developed several recommendations, to improve the quality and function of statewide school safety audit information.

1. The procedures to conduct school safety audits in Virginia should be modified to require standardized practices. The current protocol that guides the conduct of school safety audits incorporates considerable flexibility for local school systems. This dramatically reduces the feasibility of producing a meaningful summary of school safety audit information at the statewide level

2. Standardized reporting tools to document school safety audit findings should be created, and local school systems should be required to use them. Because use of a standardized report format is not mandated by Code, school safety audit data is not amenable to statewide reporting and analyses. The process should be ameliorated to allow for statewide analysis.

3. Supervision of the school safety audit program should reside within one agency to ensure a comprehensive administration model, and consequently ease data management and reporting difficulties.

The school safety audit process appears to be complicated by the fact that it is dually administered by DOE and the VCSS. Because the dual mandates delineate the process from the reporting, available school safety audit data cannot be easily analyzed.

4. State administrators should modify reporting procedures to allow meaningful analyses of the content of school safety audit reports. The content of completed school safety audits should be analyzed to provide information on emergent safety issues in local schools. Variability in data formats currently precludes the ability to conduct a meaningful analysis.

5. Entry and maintenance of school safety audit information into an electronic format should be considered as a long-term goal. Development of an electronic reporting and submission system would make data analysis and reporting less burdensome and more timely and consistent. Data could be easily accessed at both the state and local levels for compliance, review, planning, and reporting purposes. It may also reduce paper, mailing, and storage costs.